

Assisted Prison Visits Scheme

Customer Guide

Help with the cost of
prison visits if you are
on a low income.



**Ministry of
JUSTICE**

National Offender
Management Service



SCOTTISH
PRISON
SERVICE

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Section 1. INTRODUCTION

The Assisted Prison Visits Scheme (APVS) provides financial assistance to prisoners' close relatives, partners or sole visitors who are in receipt of qualifying benefits or a low income when making qualifying visits to prisons.

The scheme is funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and is managed by the Assisted Prison Visits Unit on behalf of NOMS and the Ministry of Justice. APVU also administers the scheme on behalf of the Scottish Prison Service.

Qualifying visitors can apply for assistance for a prison visit to a Channel Island prison although certain restrictions apply.

Visitors must be a resident of England, Wales or Scotland to be eligible for an assisted prison visit. There is a different scheme for residents of Northern Ireland, customer guides and application forms for that scheme are available from the prison visited or APVU.

Section 2. WHO CAN APPLY?

To qualify for assistance you must be in one of the categories listed in this section and satisfy the income rules in Section 3.

2.1 Close relatives

Close relative means: wife, husband, civil partner, mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, grandparent or adoptive step/half brother/sister, step child or step parent or someone who was in loco parentis for a significant period during the prisoner's childhood.

The minimum age for applying for an assisted prison visit is 18 years (16 years when visiting a prison in Scotland) but this restriction may be waived where the governor or director gives permission for a qualifying close relative or partner or sole visitor aged 16 or 17 years to visit unaccompanied.

2.2 Partner

A partner means a person with whom the prisoner was living, as a couple, in an established relationship, immediately before the period of remand or imprisonment was imposed. An age restriction applies. See Section 2.1.

Any children living within the family unit are also eligible to receive assistance.

2.3 Sole visitor

A sole visitor is someone who is not a close relative or partner but is the prisoner's only visitor during a four week period immediately before the date of the first assisted visit. An age restriction applies. See Section 2.1

2.4 Escort to a qualifying child or young person

There are three types of escort to a prisoner's child/children:

- Prisoner's spouse or partner.
- Carer
- A person authorised by either of the above to escort the child / children to the prison on their behalf.

Prisoner's spouse or partner

Qualifying children should be included on your application form but you can arrange for someone else to take the qualifying child/children to the prison on your behalf. They apply for assistance as an escort. However, you must write to us to authorise the escort by providing information, as shown below, and evidence to confirm the prisoner is the mother/father of the child/children being escorted to the prison. See below*

- your name, address and National Insurance Number
- name and date of birth of your child/children being escorted to the prison and their relationship to the prisoner. See below*
- details of your income. See Section 3. If you are in receipt of Income Support or Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance (Income Related) we may need to contact the local office that issued the award. To give your permission, state the name and address of the local office
- name, prison number and location of mother/father in prison
- name and address of escort.

Unless you withdraw permission by writing to us, we will assume the named escort is authorised to take your child/children on all claimed assisted prison visits.

*One of the following is acceptable proof of parentage by confirming the surname of the child/children is the same as the prisoner's:

- original short birth certificate; or
- original long birth certificate; or
- original medical card; or
- Child Benefit award notice; or
- official letter e.g. from a school, health centre etc

If you are unable to send proof to confirm the prisoner is the father you should contact your local Register Office for advice on adding the father's details to the birth record. Original documentation from the Register Office to confirm the birth record has been amended must be sent to us.

Carer

If you do not qualify as a spouse or partner but are looking after the prisoner's child/children you may be able to claim assistance as an "escort". You must meet the qualifying rules on income. See Section 3.

Proof of parentage to confirm the prisoner is the mother or father of the escorted child/children must be sent with the application form. See above.

If you decide to ask someone else to act as an escort you must comply with all the requirements of "Prisoner's spouse or partner". Unless you withdraw permission by writing to us, we will assume the named escort is authorised to take your child/children on all claimed assisted prison visits.

The escort is required to complete an application form.

Authorised person

Before any application can be assessed we require a letter of authority and certain information as outlined above from the parent or partner or carer. You do not need to meet the income qualifying rules

2.5 Escort to a qualifying adult

Adult visitors may qualify for an escort. See Section 6.1d.

The escort must complete an application form and wherever possible it should be sent to us at the same time as the visitors form.

A return journey between the home of the escort and qualifying visitor is payable subject to a maximum rate.

Where a car journey is being claimed, the total mileage allowance will normally be paid to the qualifying visitor unless advised otherwise. The volunteer driver rate only applies if the escort isn't going into the visit.

Section 3. INCOME

3.1 Qualifying income

To qualify for assistance you must satisfy the rules in Section 2 and be in receipt of one of the following or hold a Health Certificate 2 or 3:

- Income Support; or
- Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance; or

- Employment & Support Allowance (Income Related); or
- Universal Credit; or
- Tax Credit (see below); or
- Pension Credit.

If someone else claims any of the above you must enter their personal details in Part 2 of the application form

Any changes in your income must be notified to us immediately.

3.2 Income Support / Income-based Job Seeker's Allowance / Employment and Support Allowance (Income Related)

We confirm with the Department for Work and Pensions which benefit you receive and carry out regular checks.

3.3 Universal Credit

An original award notice must be sent to us when you first claim and you must send us a new award notice every four months after that. An income limit applies.

3.4 Working and Child Tax Credit

To qualify you must be in receipt of one of the following:

- Child Tax Credit; or
- the disability element in Working Tax Credit; or
- Working Tax Credit with Child Tax Credit.

In each case the gross household income as shown on the tax credit award notice must not exceed a published limit.

The original award notice must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended award notice is issued.

3.5 Pension Credit

Recipients of Pension Credit are entitled to assisted prison visits subject to meeting the criteria in Section 2.

The original award notice must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended award notice is issued.

3.6 Health Certificate 2 or 3

The original certificate must be sent to us when first applying and thereafter when a new or amended certificate is issued.

Assisted prison visits may be backdated up to three months prior to the commencement of the health certificate, subject to meeting all other conditions.

The contribution shown on the HC3 certificate for travel to receive NHS treatment is deducted from the assisted prison visit payment. The application form for a HC certificate is available from APVU.

If you have any questions about the qualifying rules contact APVU:

Helpline: 0300 063 2100 between 9am and 5pm,
Monday to Friday (except Bank Holidays)
Fax: 0121 626 3474 (24 hours)
E Mail: assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk

Section 4 PRISON ESTABLISHMENTS

4.1 Prisons in England, Wales and Scotland

All prison establishments (includes Young Offender Institution) in England, Wales and Scotland are covered by the scheme.

4.2 Prisons in Northern Ireland

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in a Northern Ireland prison.

Residents of Northern Ireland can get a scheme guide and application form for the Northern Ireland Prison Visits Scheme from the prison visited or APVU (different payment rules apply).

4.3 Guernsey prison

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in Guernsey prison.

Two conditions apply:

- assistance is given for one visit every 6 months by a maximum of 3 qualifying adults and qualifying children per visit
- one visit only will be assisted where the prisoner is serving a sentence of 6 months or less.

On sentence a UK citizen can request a transfer back to a UK prison. Guernsey Prison operates a policy of repatriation for all those sentenced to 5 years and above.

Help and advice can be obtained from the Probation Officer who works in Guernsey Prison (telephone number 01481 248376).

4.4 Jersey prison

Qualifying visitors living in England, Wales or Scotland can apply for assistance to visit a prisoner held in Jersey Prison.

The same two conditions for visiting Guernsey prison apply. Help and advice can be obtained direct from us.

Section 5 ASSISTED PRISON VISITS

5.1 Entitlement

Assistance is normally given towards a visit every two weeks and up to 26 assisted visits per 12 month period. This commences on the date of the first assisted visit.

Assisted visits can be saved up to allow two or more consecutive visits to take place during one return journey. A contribution towards an overnight stay will be considered. Each visiting day will count towards the annual allowance.

Assistance may be granted towards accumulated visits, contact us for advice.

An assisted prison visit can be used to meet, at the establishment, a prisoner who is released on temporary licence. The Confirmation of a Visit form must be date stamped at the prison. See Section 6.1e. Each return journey will count towards the annual allowance and payment of expenses will be restricted to the cost of a normal visit.

A maximum of 13 unused assisted prison visits can be carried forward at the end of the 12 month period. Contact us for more information.

5.2 Additional visits

The prison governor may authorise additional visits if it is considered necessary for resettlement purposes or the welfare of the prisoner or you. Payment will not count towards the annual allowance. See Section 5.1.

5.3 Late arrival at the prison

Some prisons may refuse to allow a visit to take place if you arrive late. In these cases you will not normally qualify for an assisted prison visit.

5.4 Cancelled visits

Assistance will normally be authorised if you travel to the prison and the visit is cancelled for operational reasons or the prisoner has been transferred to another prison. The Confirmation of a Visit form must be date stamped and if possible a reason stated for the cancellation. Payment will not count towards the annual allowance. See Section 5.1.

Section 6 WHAT FINANCIAL HELP CAN I GET?

6.1 General information

a. When to apply for assisted prison visits.

Each qualifying visitor and where applicable an escort (see Section 2.4 and 2.5) should complete an individual application form which must be sent to us within 28 days of the earliest visit claimed.

b. Proof of expenditure

Public transport, car hire, car park, bridge/tunnel tolls, overnight accommodation and childcare costs will only be reimbursed where receipts and/or used tickets are attached to the application form. You must go by the cheapest method of public transport available. APVU will reimburse the costs for the cheapest method of travel if you use public transport, even if your receipts show a higher cost.

c. Advance payment

An advance payment can be claimed towards one or two visits. You should go by the cheapest method of travel available, using off-peak trains where possible. APVU will issue rail tickets for the cheapest journey possible; this may require extra waiting time at the station for the cheaper train.

If travelling by rail you will need to put the visit date(s), stations and train times for your journey on the claim form, allowing time to get to the prison. It is very important that you inform APVU if your visit date(s) change before you get the tickets call: 0300 063 2100, 09.00 to 17.00, Monday to Friday (except Bank Holidays) or e-mail: assisted.prison.visits@noms.gsi.gov.uk

If the tickets you receive are for the wrong date you should return them to APVU with a covering letter addressed to Customer Services, you will also need to make a new claim if you want to go on different dates. APVU may ask you to pay for tickets that have been issued if you do not tell them about changed or cancelled visits.

Tickets will be posted to you with any other payment that is due. The collection code for tickets being collected from a Fastticket machine at the station will be posted or e-mailed to you. To use the Fastticket machine you must insert your debit or credit card to confirm your identity.

Rail warrants are exchanged for tickets at the station (the use of rail warrants is being phased out); always ask for a receipt when exchanging the warrant at the station.

If you decide to apply for two advance payments at the same time and intend visiting every 14 days you may find it helpful to apply for a further advance payment immediately after the first of the two visits. You must include a completed Confirmation of a Visit form and where applicable any travel/accommodation tickets/receipts for the visit you have just made. You can continue applying every two weeks and the requested future date will normally be in around 4 weeks.

We will not allow you to hold more than two advance payments at any one time.

All tickets/receipts must be retained and sent to us with a completed Confirmation of a Visit form (see Section 6.1e) within 28 days of the visit date/s or they can be attached to the next claim if sooner.

If you cancel or do not visit within 7 days of the date shown on the application form, all monies and, if applicable, the rail warrant / tickets, must be returned to us or send a cheque/postal order payable to "APVU".

Contact our Customer Helpline if you need any advice or help in applying for an advance payment

d. Special needs

If you are too ill have severe problems going on a visit caused by a medical condition or are 75 years or over you can apply for:

- an escort (relative or friend) to help you during the journey. See Section 2.5
- a hire car. This won't be restricted to the cost of public transport. See Section 6.2e.
- use of a taxi for short journeys e.g. to / from bus stops, coach or railway stations. See Section 6.2f.
- taking your car on a ferry to the Isle of Wight when visiting a prisoner in HMP Isle of Wight. See Section 6.2d.

In all medical cases we will need a letter from your doctor, the letter must state clearly that you need an escort or taxi to the nearest bus, coach or rail stations for the purpose of a prison visit. Unless the condition is stated as permanent a further letter will be required every four months.

e. Confirmation of visits

A completed Confirmation of a Visit form must be included with an application form for each visitor and where appropriate escort, applying for assistance. If you are requesting an advance payment see Section 6.1c.

Two Confirmation of a Visit forms are enclosed with the application pack. Complete Part A and take one form with you to the establishment, it must be date stamped to prove the visit took place.

When you arrive at the establishment or Visitors' Centre (not every prison has one) find out who is responsible for completing Part B.

The date stamped form will be handed back to you.

Please read the following notes carefully as certain restrictions may apply to Section 6.1 a-e above

6.2 Travel

You can go by car, motor cycle or public transport. You must use the cheapest method of public transport available for the journey you are making. Check to see if you can go by bus or coach for, if you go by rail use standard class trains, travelling off peak where possible. If you travel by public transport, APVU reserve the right to limit your payment to the cheapest method available.

Ensure you obtain receipts and also enclose all used tickets with your application form.

a. Bus / Coach

Check to see if you can go by bus or coach, if you go by rail use standard class trains, travelling off peak where possible.

Regular bus users can apply for the reimbursement of a discount travel card. However, we must be satisfied that the cost of the card will be recovered through lower fares when visiting a prison establishment. Ask the bus operator for details of any local schemes.

b. Rail / Underground

Look for the cheapest train for your journey to the prison, check standard or off peak first. You will be paid for the cheapest rail fare available, APVU will limit your payment if you choose to use a more expensive train.

Regular rail users can apply for the reimbursement of a discount travel card. However, we must be satisfied that the cost of the card will be recovered through lower fares when visiting a prison establishment. Ask at the rail station for details of any local schemes.

c. Car / Motor Cycle

A fixed rate per mile is paid. The distance of the return journey (normally the shortest route) is calculated using a computerised journey planner.

When sharing a car with someone who is also claiming assistance, both forms should be sent to us together. One of the forms must be endorsed "driver".

Receipted car parking charges will be reimbursed for visits to those establishments where car parking is not provided or is restricted.

Bridge and tunnel tolls are reimbursable.

The cost of a "park and ride" bus service will be met where used tickets or a receipt is enclosed. An adjustment to the journey mileage may be necessary.

The volunteer driver rate for escorts to visitors with medical conditions is only paid if they are not going into the visit. See Section 2.5.

Drivers of a car provided under a Motability Finance contract may be entitled to financial help towards any excess mileage charge. Contact us for further information.

d. Visits to a prison on the Isle of Wight

Car parking charges at the mainland port are refundable.

The cost of taking a car on the ferry will only be met if you are unable to use a bus on the Isle of Wight due to a medical condition.

Foot passengers are restricted to the cheapest ferry to allow the visit. The cost of the return journey by bus from the port to the prison is refundable.

e. Car hire

You can arrange car hire from a private company.

Reimbursement of a hire car plus the petrol allowance must not exceed the cost of the same journey by public transport. However, we do take into account the number of assisted visitors travelling with you and any savings in fares, light refreshment allowance etc.

f. Taxi

The reimbursement of taxi fares for journeys to/from bus stops/railway stations will only be considered where the walking distance exceeds 20 minutes in one direction or you are aged 75 years or over.

Taxi journeys should wherever possible be booked through a taxi office.

Checks are regularly carried out with the taxi operator to validate claimed taxi fares.

Taxi receipts should, wherever possible, include the following details:

- date of journey
- name, address and telephone number of taxi company
- name/signature of driver
- details of journey
- fare paid.

g. Community bus or similar

Payment will be restricted to the actual fare charged or if cheaper, the cost of the same journey by public transport.

h. Air travel

The cost of air travel will only be paid if the overall cost of the visit is less than other methods of public transport.

It is recommended that you contact us before incurring any expenditure.

6.3 Light refreshment allowance

If you need to buy food or drink on the day of the visit, and are away from home for more than 5 or over 10 hours, you may be eligible for a light meal refreshment. Tick the box on the application form and enter your times of travel. APVU reserve the right to ask for receipts.

6.4 Overnight accommodation

If you apply for payment of overnight accommodation costs we will take the following factors into account before approving payment:

- length of time absent from home
- difficulty of journey
- number and ages of any eligible children
- your age
- availability of public transport
- medical needs. See Section 6.1d.

The cost of travel between the accommodation address and establishment is payable but subject to a maximum published rate. You must get approval from APVU before incurring expenses.

A light refreshment allowance may be payable.

Regular checks are carried out to validate claimed overnight accommodation costs.

6.5 Child care

The cost of a registered childminder or breakfast/after school club or similar will be considered if you decide not to take a qualifying visitor who is under 16 to the prison.

The following details should be sent with your application form:

- name and address of school/childminder
- registration number of childminder and name and address of local authority (if applicable)
- name of children and date of care
- cost per hour.

A receipt must be obtained and attached to the application form.

We do not normally contact the childminder or school direct.

Section 7 APPLYING FOR ASSISTED PRISON VISITS

7.1 Information and help

Information about the scheme and prison establishments is available on the Ministry of Justice website: www.justice.gov.uk and www.gov.uk

Contact us direct if you:

- require help in completing the form
- have a general query about the scheme or applying for an advance payment
- are concerned about a current application or a recent payment
- wish to report the loss or theft of a giro cheque.

Our address is: APVU, PO Box 2152, Birmingham B15 1SD.

**Telephone: 0300 063 2100 between 9am and 5pm,
Monday to Friday (except Bank Holidays)**

Fax: 0121 626 3474 (24 hours)

E Mail: assisted.prison.visits@hmpps.gsi.gov.uk

Independent advice, information and support to anyone with a relative or friend in prison (with the exception of assisted prison visit casework enquiries) can be obtained from:

Offenders' Families Helpline (for prisons in England & Wales)

Tel no: 0808 8082003 (calls are free)

Website: www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk

Scottish Prisoners' Families Helpline (for prisons in Scotland)

Tel no: 0500 839383 (calls are free)

Website: www.familiesoutside.org.uk

Email: admin@familiesoutside.org.uk

Information and support may be available locally from: National Probation Service, Youth Offending Team, Social Services and Citizens Advice Bureau.

7.2 Completion of application form

Before posting check to ensure:

- all sections are complete
- the declaration is signed
- tickets/receipts and a completed Confirmation of a Visit form are enclosed for visits already made
- supporting documentation (where applicable) is included.

7.3 Payment of an assisted prison visit

Once your application is assessed and approved you will receive the following:

- giro cheque and / or rail warrant/ *Fastticket* collection reference
- rail tickets will be sent out separately for advance visits unless *Fastticket is being used*
- letter to explain how the payment was calculated
- Repeat Claim Form
- two Confirmation of a Visit forms.

The giro cheque must be cashed at the nominated post office within 3 months of issue. Proof of identity may be required.

7.4 Lost or stolen giro cheques and rail tickets

Report any loss or theft of a giro cheque, rail warrant or rail tickets to the police, then write to us to confirm the following details: circumstances of the loss or theft, date reported to the police, crime reference number, name of police officer who dealt with you and address of police station.

A replacement giro cheque will normally be issued within 8 working days of being notified of the loss or theft.

7.5 General

This booklet is a guide to the Assisted Prison Visits Scheme, it does not include all the rules of the scheme. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information given is correct at the time of publishing. The rules and payment rates in this booklet are subject to change, your claim will be assessed using the rules and rates applicable at the time it is submitted.

Section 8 STANDARDS OF SERVICE

8.1 Our standards

We aim to provide the best possible service by meeting the standards set out below:

- staff will be polite and helpful
- you will be treated with respect, understanding and without prejudice
- your application will normally be assessed within 3 weeks of receipt
- your letters and emails will normally be answered in full within 8 working days of receipt or an acknowledgement will be issued if we require further information
- a telephone service normally operates between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday (except Bank Holidays). Calls will be answered within 10 seconds. A message machine will advise the caller to telephone at a later time if the line is busy or if the service is not available for operational reasons. Calls are recorded for training and to assist with complaint resolution.
- staff will give their name when answering the telephone or writing to you
- we will carry out customer surveys and publish the results in a Newsletter
- we will tell you if our standards are being met via a Newsletter and if appropriate the action we are taking to improve our service
- we will tell you about any changes to the scheme via a Newsletter
- the Head of Unit will welcome your suggestions for improvement and comments on our service
- we will publish an appeals and complaints procedure.

Your responsibility to us:

- treat all our staff with courtesy.

We will not tolerate:

- abusive, intimidating or threatening behaviour
- swearing, shouting or offensive language
- Insulting remarks about a person's sex, race, nationality, disability status, actual or perceived religion or belief or actual or perceived sexual orientation

8.2 Complaint procedure

If you are not satisfied with our service or you wish to make a complaint please write to: APVU, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD or e-mail [assisted.prison.visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:visits@hmps.gsi.gov.uk) or telephone 0300 063 2100 between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday (except Bank Holidays).

We will carry out a full investigation and you will receive a telephone or written reply within 5 working days of receipt or a progress report if the investigation takes longer.

We will do our best to put the matter right, give an explanation and, where appropriate, an apology.

Should you feel the response is unsatisfactory you can write to: Head of Assisted Prison Visits Unit, PO Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD (for prisons in England & Wales)

Directorate of Partnerships and Commissioning, Scottish Prison Service, Calton House, 5 Redheughs Rigg, Edinburgh, EH12 9HW (for prisons in Scotland)

If you still feel your complaint has not been dealt with satisfactorily, contact your local Member of Parliament and ask that they raise the matter with the Minister of State responsible for the National Offender Management Service (for prisons in England and Wales) or with the Minister of State responsible for the Prison Service in Scotland (for prisons in Scotland).

You can also complain to the Parliamentary Ombudsman who will investigate complaints from members of the public about the way they have been treated by government departments and/or their executive agencies. Further information can be obtained from:

Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration
Millbank Tower
Millbank
London, SW1P 4QP

Helpline: 0845 015 4033, **Fax:** 020 7217 4160,
Website: www.ombudsman.org.uk

Data protection

The Ministry of Justice (HM Prison Service) uses and retains the personal data of Assisted Prison Visits Scheme (APVS) customers for the purposes of the provision of expenses from the scheme. Assistance from the APVS can only be granted by supplying the prescribed information in order to allow the assessment of claims and any necessary checks to be undertaken.

You have the right to request details as to the personal information we hold about you; and subsequently request that we correct any personal information if it is found to be inaccurate or out of date.

We will not share your information with other organisations unless it is required for the purposes of prevention, detection of crime; apprehension, prosecution, and management of offenders; prevention of terrorism; National Security; or if required to do so by law.

For more information please contact the Information Access Representative at the Assisted Prison Visits Unit, P O Box 2152, Birmingham, B15 1SD. Or see our Privacy Policy on our website at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/global/privacy/index.htm>

Equal opportunities statement

The Assisted Prison Visits Unit is committed to treating staff and customers in an open, courteous and respectful manner and anyone who contacts us will be dealt with without prejudice.

RATES PAYABLE / INCOME LIMITS

Note – rates are subject to change without prior notice

Mileage allowance

13p per mile

Light Refreshment Allowance

Over 5 hours	£2.55	} the qualifying age for payment to eligible children is 1 year and over
Over 10 hours	£5.10	

Overnight Allowances

London and the South East:

Adult £34 per night (maximum)	} Adult includes eligible children aged 14 years and over
Child £17 per night (maximum)	

Elsewhere:

Adult £28 per night (maximum)	} Child includes eligible children aged 3 years and over and up to 13 years
Child £14 per night (maximum)	

The maximum cost payable for a single journey between the prison & accommodation address (or vice versa) is £10

Car Hire

£40 per day (inclusive) plus 13 pence per mile

Childminding

The rate will not normally exceed £3.75 per hour

Motability cars

5 pence per excess mile charged

Volunteer Driver

27 pence per mile

Escort

Payment for a return journey between the home of an escort and visitor will not normally exceed £27

The annual household income limit for 2013/14 as shown on the Tax Credit award notice is £17,474. This limit is reviewed annually in accordance with information and advice from the DWP and HM Revenue and Customs. The Universal Credit income limit is available from APVU.

Correct at 1 October 2013.

